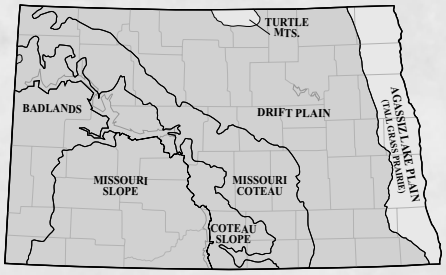
Buffaloe (Bison)

Harold Umberd



KEY TO MAPS

- **PAST** – frequent distribution
- **PAST** – less frequent distribution
- **PRESENT** – frequent distribution
- **PRESENT** – less frequent distribution

While passing through the Dakotas and Montana, Lewis and Clark saw bison in such numbers that they could only guess as to the size of herds. Based upon journals of other explorers and fur traders, bison were abundant across the state with relatively higher numbers in the west as compared to the east. A growing market for robes and the increased use of rifles in the 1820s set the stage for the decline in bison numbers. The rate of decline increased rapidly between 1860 and 1880. The introduction of cattle, and their associated diseases, may have also played a role in this decline. In 1884 the last North Dakota bison was killed south of Dickinson.

Bison may now be viewed at Sullys Hill Game Preserve near Devils Lake, the Dakota Zoo in Bismarck, and both units of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. Additionally, dozens of private ranchers have now incorporated bison into their ranching operations.

Goats, Cabrie or Antelope (Pronghorn)

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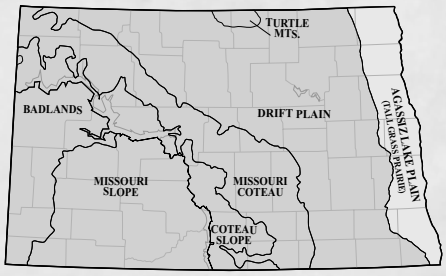
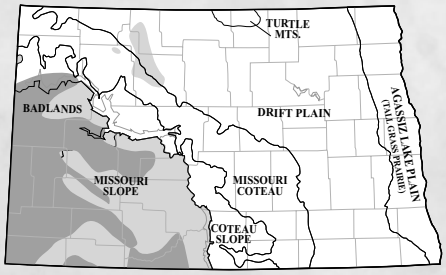


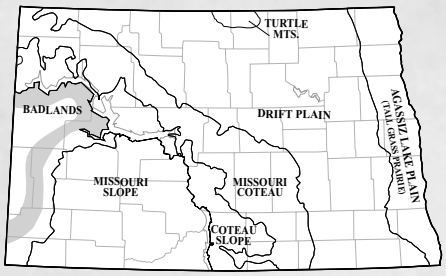


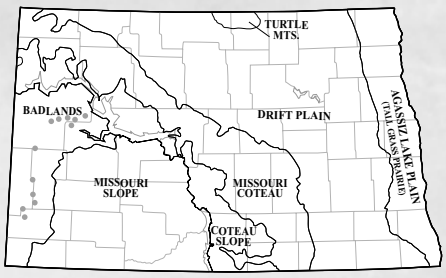
After bison, the next most abundant animal that Lewis and Clark encountered was the pronghorn. This species, new to science, received its first technical description and name based upon specimens sent back by the expedition from Fort Mandan. Although found all across the state, pronghorn reached their highest numbers in the western third. In late summer 1873 a disease swept through western North Dakota that killed an estimated 75-90 percent of the western herd.

Between 1880 and 1910, the remaining population receded as the incoming tide of settlers converted prairie to cropland. By 1925 only 225 animals were found in western North Dakota. Pronghorn numbers now generally fluctuate between 5,000 and 10,000 head. They may be seen throughout the Little Missouri National Grasslands, but their highest densities are in Bowman and Slope counties.

Ibex or Bighorn Animals (Bighorn Sheep)

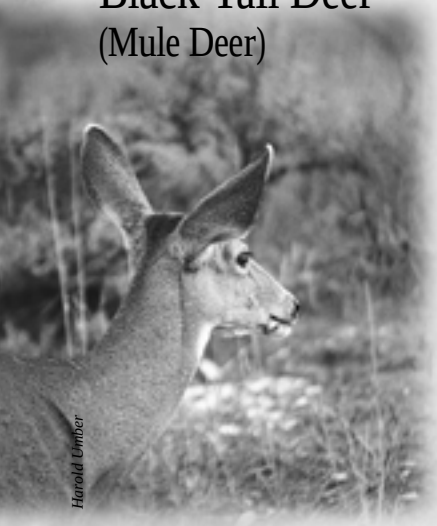
Harold Umberd

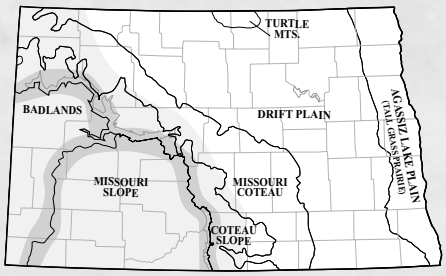


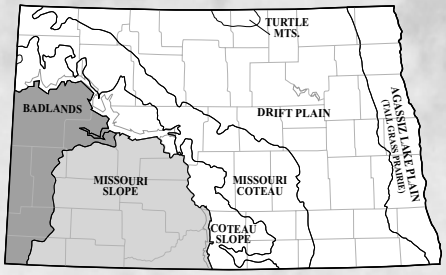


Historically, bighorn sheep were sighted along the Missouri River as far downstream as present day New Town and throughout much of the rougher terrain of the Little Missouri badlands. Joseph Fields, a Corps of Discovery hunter, first sighted this animal in North Dakota along the Yellowstone River. Prior to settlement, bighorns probably numbered in the thousands. Unrestricted subsistence and trophy hunting, coupled with new diseases introduced by domestic sheep, brought about a rapid decline of wild sheep in the late 1870s and 1880s. In 1905, the last known bighorn ram in the state was shot near Magpie Creek in McKenzie County. In 1956 the North Dakota Game and Fish Department reintroduced bighorn sheep to the Little Missouri National Grasslands. Today more than 200 bighorns are found scattered across the badlands in 12 more or less discrete herds.

Black Tail Deer
(Mule Deer)


Harold Umber



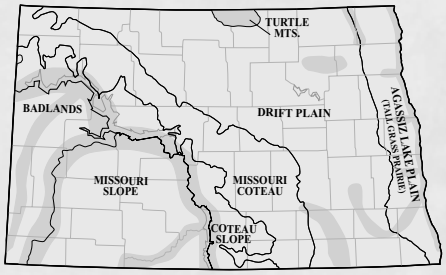


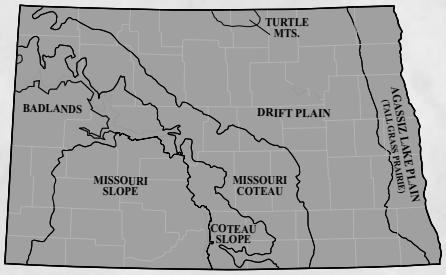
The mule deer was first named and described by Lewis and Clark. Presettlement distributions of mule deer in North Dakota were probably similar to what is found today. The primary range of this animal has always been the Little Missouri badlands but they were found in lower numbers on the prairie as far east as the Missouri River, with a few small isolated herds located north and east of the Missouri River.

As with all big game species, mule deer were nearly extirpated from the state. By 1900 only a handful were left in remote corners of the badlands. Mule deer can now be found throughout the badlands, along the breaks of the Missouri River, and in small scattered populations south and west of the Missouri River. Some habitat has been converted and lost for this species, but all things considered, we are probably close to presettlement numbers of mule deer in the state.

Fallow, Red or Common Deer
(White-tailed Deer)

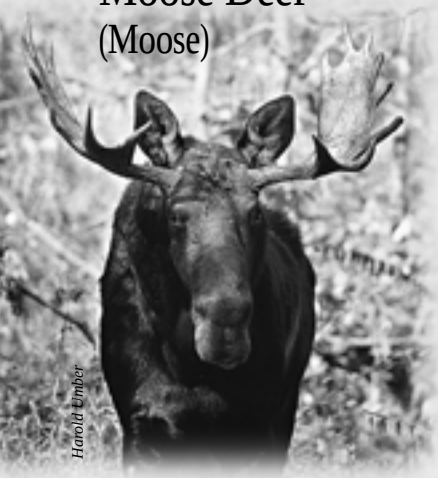

Harold Umber

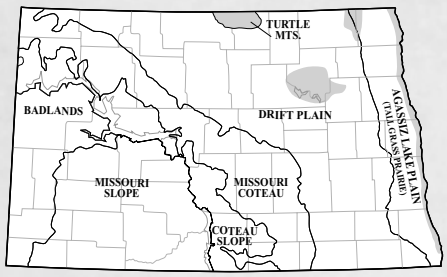


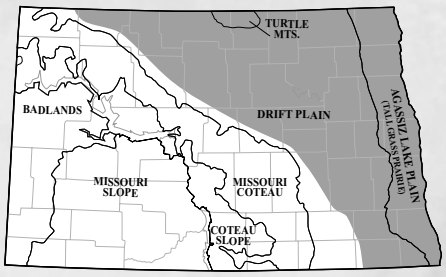


The white-tailed deer was observed in good numbers by Lewis and Clark along the Missouri River once they got away from the established Indian villages. Prior to European settlement white-tailed deer were probably found throughout the state along the major river systems and around isolated wooded buttes, but scarce over much of the prairie. During the 1820s a market for deer hides developed along the Missouri River. In 1833 the American Fur Company at Fort Union, near present day Williston, was exporting 20,000 to 30,000 deer hides each year (Note: these numbers probably include mule deer and white-tailed deer harvested in Montana.) By 1867 Charles Larpenteur, a fur trader at Fort Buford (one mile east of the abandoned Fort Union), reported trading only 1,800 deer hides. This decline continued as subsistence hunting by European settlers spread across the state. Again, as with other big game species, white-tailed deer were nearly gone from the state by 1900. Regulated hunting, introduction of agricultural row crops, and the proliferation of shelter belts and tree rows have resulted in a remarkable rebound of this highly adaptable species. Most biologists would agree that white-tailed deer numbers now exceed presettlement populations. Whitetails are found throughout the state.

Moose Deer
(Moose)


Harold Umber

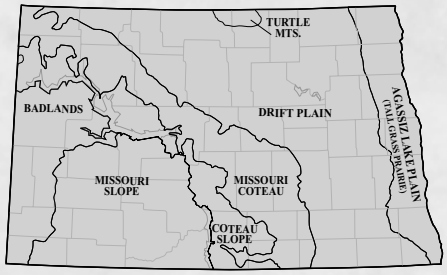


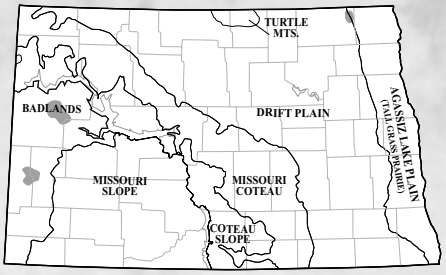


At times it is interesting to note what early visitors to our state did not see. Lewis and Clark, as well as other explorers, did not record moose on much of the northern Great Plains. Historically, moose were reported in the Turtle Mountains, Pembina Hills, the forested edges of the northern Red River valley, and around Devils Lake. With protection from poaching, coupled with habitat changes, moose are now able to occupy a much larger range in North Dakota than they did at the time of Lewis and Clark. Today about one third of the state is open to a regulated moose hunting season. The best opportunities to view moose in North Dakota remain the Turtle Mountains and Pembina Hills.

Elk
(Elk)

Harold Umber

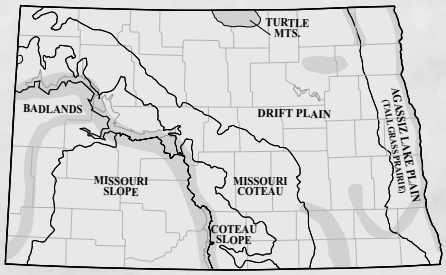




In 1804, the abundance of elk on the northern Great Plains was eclipsed only by bison and pronghorn. Elk were found in woodlands and on the open prairie. Elk remained common throughout the state until the late 1870s when railroads brought homesteaders. With elk providing a large quantity of choice meat, and being relatively easy to kill, subsistence and market hunting resulted in the rapid extirpation of this animal. Only a handful of elk remained in the state after 1900, with the last known animal being shot by a man from Mountrail County. After a failed attempt in the 1940s to bring elk back to the badlands, elk were accidentally released in 1977 from a captive herd on Fort Berthold Indian Reservation. These elk established themselves in and around the Killdeer Mountains southwest of the reservation. In the early 1970s elk also began appearing on their own in the Pembina Hills near Walhalla in Pembina County. By 1982 a limited hunting season was permitted on both the eastern and western herds. In 1985, the National Park Service released 47 elk in the south unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. Today elk may be viewed and hunted in Cavalier and Pembina counties in the northeastern portion of the state, Dunn and McKenzie counties in the northern badlands, and Billings and Golden Valley counties in the central badlands.

White or Grey Bear
(Grizzly Bear)

Lewis & Clark Foundation



The expedition first encountered the white bear near the mouth of the Heart River south of Bismarck. Early reports by Lewis and Clark were marked by astonishment at the size of these animals as well as a bit of bravado. They apparently put too much faith in their flintlock rifles.

After members of the party had been charged by several wounded bears that required up to 10 rifle balls to kill, Lewis finally admitted *"…I must confess that I do not like the gentlemen and had reather fight two Indians than one bear."*

Grizzly bear were apparently found throughout the state, particularly in the forested bottoms along the major rivers, with bear numbers apparently highest in the western third of the state. Their decline seems to have started after 1850 when better large bore rifles became more common. By 1880 the grizzly was a rare sight. The last documented reports of this animal date from 1889 when tracks and other sign were found along the Little Missouri River.